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# Relationships Developed Abroad: Impacts on Learning During a Short-term Field Study in Italy

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### Recommended Citation

Davis, Brittany Marie and Coryell, Joellen E. (2017). "Relationships Developed Abroad: Impacts on Learning During a Short-term Field Study in Italy," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2017/papers/27>

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## **Relational Learning Abroad: Examining an Adult Short-term Field Study in Italy**

Brittany Davis, M.A., and Joellen E. Coryell, Ph.D.

**Abstract:** This study examines graduate student's experiences with personal relationships developed abroad and how these relationships enhanced their learning while on a short-term international field study in Italy.

**Keywords:** adult study abroad, adult study tours, relationships in adult learning, graduate study abroad

In summer 2016, a group of 10 graduate students from a large, public university in the southwest U.S. attended a graduate problems course in adult education which included an 8-day field study in Italy. The sojourn involved students visiting sites of knowledge and cultural understanding throughout Italy as well as an opportunity to connect with other graduate students in adult education at an Italian university. Though personal interactions, informal reflection activities, and observations with the participants, we realized that the relationships formed while abroad seemed to have an impact on the learning that occurred while abroad. With an interest in interaction and relationship, our research questions included: When does relational learning occur while abroad? In what ways can instructors design short-term graduate study abroad programs that foster meaningful relationships for learning? What effect do relationships have on the adult learning process in short-term study abroad programs?

### **Review of Literature**

The opportunity for graduate students to earn credit through studies in a foreign locale is increasing (Dirkx, et al., 2014). However, existing literature on study abroad continues to focus heavily on undergraduate students and the benefits that derive from study abroad including intercultural sensitivity and language acquisition. Scholarly literature exploring the interpersonal aspects of adult study abroad is sparse. Here we briefly review studies that included some analysis of relationships in adult formal learning settings, including while abroad.

Lundberg (2003) conducted a study investigating the effects of relationships on adults in higher education asserting that adults, like their younger counterparts, benefit from "educationally related peer-relationships" (p. 682). Additionally, Lundberg concluded that peer learning raises the investment students make in their learning, both individually and in a group context. Examining interpersonal learning through observations during group reflection time while abroad, Coryell (2011) determined that relationships between students, as well as between students and professors, created "rich opportunities for learning" (p. 8). Throughout group reflection discussions, students mentioned that relationships formed during the experience enhanced their time abroad. Relationships found in this study included interactions between learner and learner, learner and professor, learner and content, individuals and the foreign culture, and within the learner her/himself. These relationships resulted in the development of interpersonal skills including "negotiation, compromise, and empathic consideration" (p. 8). Similarly, Lalley (2009) observed and interviewed students who participated in a short-term study abroad course where participants expressed they were surprised at the unexpected "positive group experiences" (p. 102). Additionally, students felt a strong sense of comradery as they could successfully act as a team to make decisions and interpret social norms in public places.

Participants felt they built strong connections with one another because they all shared goals in common. Hartford (2010) studied the role of community in becoming interculturally sensitive and found that students' confidence rose as a sense of trust developed among members. This confirmed Lenning and Ebbers (1999) assertion that "shared values, caring for one another, and appreciation of cooperation" increase confidence among the group members to the point where the unexpected is "welcomed and celebrated" (p. 5) thus enhancing trust among the group. Additionally, they posited that maintaining a level of inclusiveness allows differences to be acknowledged. Heightened levels of trust among students in the study abroad group allow learners to utilize each other as resources more often which provides a variety of perspectives beyond information provided solely by the instructor (Roy, 2006). To contribute to a trusting environment among students, instructors should remain as flexible and personal as possible with the students rather than rigid and overly structured (Coryell, 2011; Lundberg, 2003). The common thread throughout literature indicates relationships developed abroad enhance the experience.

### **Methodology**

This research was conducted as a case study. Case studies are in depth descriptions and analyses of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because our focus was on interaction and relationship, this study is framed by situated learning, and communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This framework recognizes that people learn through social interaction, emphasizing the influence of relationships with other community members and acquisition of certain skills, standards, and behaviors the community values.

Participants ranged in age between 25 and 60 from a variety of backgrounds, race/ethnicities, motivations, and work experiences. Nine of the ten registered students participated in the study. Students were all enrolled in adult education graduate programs; seven were doctoral students, and two were master's students. There were five women and four men. While abroad, participants engaged in scheduled cultural activities as well as two discussion-based seminars with Italian graduate students and faculty in adult education. The instructor created an itinerary of activities which students were required to attend; free time was also included across the week's schedule.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the students. The interviews were conducted approximately six months after the course ended. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and students were asked about the relationships formed while abroad and probed about how those relationships may have influenced their learning. The interviews were transcribed and comprised of 2,780 lines (or 79 pages) of data.

Initial data analysis began during the transcription of the interviews. We then conducted a more in-depth analysis by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews and made margin notes at times when participants discussed how relationships influenced their learning, when relationships developed, and how relationships enhanced their learning experience. These margin notes were then compiled to organize the codes in which we looked for sensitizing concepts, "important features of social interaction" (Bowen, 2006, p.3), that struck us as relevant to understating characteristics of learning relationships, the situations in which social interactions occurred and relationships developed, and the influence such interactions had on learning while abroad. Each interview was first analyzed as an individual case, and then further analysis took

place across all interviews to determine subcategories and eventually themes to answer our research questions across the data set. A brief description of findings can be found in the following section. All names are pseudonyms.

### **Findings**

Relationships among students tended to cultivate during free time while abroad and through roommate interactions. The development of deep, meaningful relationships allowed students to be more comfortable with one another which resulted in students focusing on learning rather than the fear or discomfort of being in a foreign locale. Additionally, meaningful connections between students enhanced the learning experience through the ability to share and value different perspectives.

#### **Relationship Development Through Free Time and Roommates**

We know that learning does not always occur in a classroom, and adult study abroad is no exception (Coryell, 2011). As such, free time within the foreign locale resulted in the development of many relationships. We found that students felt they could “bond” and relationships were “strengthened” throughout the free time and informal learning opportunities while abroad. One participant offered, “it seemed like every time we had a meal a new relationship aspect would emerge.” Time spent eating meals together was mentioned by six of the learners throughout the interviews as an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships. One shared, “Sitting around the table... we got comfortable together eating dinner, drinking wine together...and just not worried about the papers [and projects].” Another complimented these thoughts by offering, “Sharing a meal with [the other] students was just a way to coalesce, so kind of gel and like strengthen that bond between scholars, but more than scholars, friends.” One participant also felt that sharing meals was influential in reflecting on the day’s experience and building relationships adding, “the evening meals were a great time to digest the day-long activities.” One respondent noted that the “informal moments” allowed him to develop relationships, such as “going out to eat together or having the meeting at [the instructor’s] apartment towards the end of the course, sitting downstairs in the dormitory.” Other types of informal moments during free time which allowed students to develop relationships included the travel time between designated sites to be visited. A learner felt that “traveling together” gave him time to develop relationships and even talk about the experience of traveling by train, which was new for many of the participants. Free time abroad was highly valued as students found it to be an opportunity to relax, develop relationships with the others, and reflect on the activities and experiences they had had at different points in the course. Students also appreciated free time as an opportunity to pursue individual interests in the foreign locale, such as visiting museums or religious establishments that were not on the schedule. Such opportunities were also a time for students to bond with one another as they discovered common interests.

Six of the nine students interviewed had roommates throughout their stay in Italy, and each of them expressed the impactful role having a roommate had on their experience and learning while abroad. Participants used roommates as partners to share daily reflections and as someone upon whom they could rely throughout the sojourn for constant support. When asked which opportunities allowed him to strengthen relationships while abroad, one learner shared,

“Well definitely Royce as my roommate... we just had a really good time, getting to know each other and, so I think being roommates with somebody was strengthening the

relationship. You know making the decision to have a roommate was a big decision, but I think without having been a roommate with someone I would have felt isolated. So, I am glad I did that.”

As adults, making the decision to have a roommate might be difficult given independence expectations and experiences at home. However, those that did decide to have a roommate indicated how instrumental that was in building relationships. A female respondent offered that having roommates “was really powerful” and said, “I was sharing a room with two other people... I felt like the [relationship] went a lot deeper, and those little, very personal moments got to be shared with people who were complete strangers to me.” Relationships were built, and students began to have a sense of community as support and comradery increased among the group. Roommates enjoyed oftentimes finding some common ground missing their loved ones back home which one felt “bonded [them] a little.” Another student felt that having a roommate allowed for an existing relationship to progress to a “deeper level.” Roommates provided students the opportunity to bond on a more profound level than they may have otherwise, thus allowing them to feel even more comfortable, supported, and trusting of one another.

### **Group Relationships Enhanced Learning**

*“I felt kind of a sense of community even though I wasn’t super close with most of the people. I felt it created a safe environment so I was able to be more confident... I was able to focus on the education part, or just the learning.”*

This quote above offers the sense of comfort and support felt among the group of students while abroad. The development of relationships into a comfortable, supportive environment provided the space students needed to relax in the foreign setting and focus on learning and the overall cultural experience. Students expressed the value they placed on the ability to “help each other” and “have each other’s back” and to feel “comfortable.” Many echoed these sentiments, “Everybody kind of provided support. Everybody kind of wanted to make sure everyone was okay.” The participants collectively agreed that all the students got along well, and each was supportive to one another. Several students felt that this sense of support allowed them to focus on learning as opposed to the fear and uncertainty of being in a new and often strange place. One participant shared:

“I think [building relationships] was huge because I believe that when you are having a good time, when you emotionally feel supported and you create those bonds with people who are around you, I think the learning experience is enhanced. You feel freer to share what’s really in your thoughts.”

Another also felt relationships were influential in his learning and suggested:

“When we were there, there was a sense of kinship... when people are comfortable with their learning, when they *are* learning, they are able to learn more, and I feel like all nine of the people I was with made me feel comfortable and safe while we were there.”

Others offered similar feelings regarding the importance of various perspective taking with the group while abroad. Sentiments such as the following exemplify the importance these interactions had on their learning: “[I] never felt like I had to have the perspective that Toby or anybody else had. I felt that whatever, whoever, was bringing something to the table was actually much validated.” “We saw a lot of the same stuff but people picked up different things along the way... taking everyone else’s perceptions of what we all saw, yet reported so differently, this was of interest to me.” “We kind of did different things, but at the end of the day we were able to group up and we were able to relate... you know like how was your day and what did you learn or see, because we had different perspectives, and so it was interesting.” And, finally, “Everybody had a different light or a different perspective which analyzed what we were looking at... [I] think that was really good, and that was very important.” Most importantly, the ability to share experiences, perspectives, and opinions created learning which was rich and meaningful.

Students also expressed the role of the instructor in regards to creating a supportive environment. Additionally, many students felt the relationships they built with the instructor enhanced their learning due to her vibrant passion for Italy and ability to make all group members feel included and supported. Her “leadership” and ability to “give a different perspective” was valued by the students. One respondent shared:

“The relationship with [the instructor] was very important. I think the way she prepared us for the class and for the experience and the way she supported us through the experience was huge. She was guiding the learning experience and being extremely non-judgmental about anybody, whatever they were feeling.”

Another expressed a strong sense of “trust” he put in the instructor, which was difficult for him as a professor, himself. There was a strong sense that the participants believed the instructor was “supportive in learning” while abroad.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The sense of trust, comradery, and support experienced by all students enabled them to feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives and opinions about the experience without negative repercussions. They felt “validated” to share their thoughts because they viewed the group as “open minded.” Learning which occurs in small groups presents students opportunities to hear the different ways in which their group members approach things (Brookfield, 2015) and enables students to explore different perspectives and examine and refine their own understandings (Dart, 1997). A common thread throughout the interviews was the value placed on listening to the different perspectives and different ways in which students were taking in the experience. Sharing perspectives and experiences, especially as students dispersed into different groups during free time allowed for more learning to occur throughout the short time abroad. The ability to share and value such different perspectives is such a rich source of learning both in and outside the classroom, but perhaps more so abroad. Students appreciated and respected each other’s views and accepted them as learning opportunities and chances to reflect more deeply on what they had just experienced.

For this adult study abroad program, the CoP existed within the study tour course and the students enrolled in the course, and expanded to include the places and people visited in Italy. Students expressed in their interviews how valuable it was to build relationships and the impact they had on their learning within this community. Students could identify shared domains of

interest (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) through disclosing their experiences and perspectives through occasions during class and free time for reflection. Students described the group as a community; this community can be characterized as one that offered logistical support, new learning perspectives, deeply meaningful reflection opportunities, and physical and emotional safety.

This research is meaningful to adult study abroad as it displays the powerful role relationships can have in learning while abroad as well as creating meaningful learning settings while outside the classroom, echoing Roy's (2006), Lalley's (2009) and Coryell's (2011) previous research. The ability to connect deeply with the other classmates opened the opportunity for more candid conversations regarding the learning which was occurring. Without such strong connections and trust among group members, it is likely that students would not have been as receptive to different perspectives or opinions about the experience.

Implications for practice include strongly suggesting students to room together where possible. Not only was it a financial relief, but students in this study highly valued their relationships built while back in their rooms. Additionally, free time is essential to building relationships and learning while abroad, thus reasonable amounts of out of class time should be scheduled in the course design. Students can be encouraged to spend time in smaller groups to build and strengthen relationships and take time to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. In addition, instructors should consider ways to establish interpersonal communications with individual students, as well, while abroad in short-term sojourns. These experiences were found in this study to be paramount for adult learning in international field experiences. As this study is only limited to nine students in one foreign study context, we encourage others to conduct similar studies with students in other locales to provide further insight into how relationships can impact learning while abroad.

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